

A rhetorical analysis of the Morrison government's 2021 budget announcement and opposition reply

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This essay will explore and apply a rhetorical approach to texts from the 2021 federal budget and budget reply to draw a connection between communication, politics and governing in the contemporary Australian environment from which they emerge.

Rhetoric is assumed to be wordy, disingenuous or simply “empty rhetoric”. However, rhetoric here can be defined as “the strategic use of linguistic and other materials to persuade particular audiences to some aimed social outcome,” (Dearman, Greenfield & Williams, 2018 p.) Leith and Myerson (1989) suggest rhetoric is a “perpetual dialogue between speakers and listeners... proposition and counter proposition, question an answer,” (Leith & Myerson 1989, p.2). Rhetorics are used by interested actors to “to engender new states of affairs, capacities, or relations,” (Dearman, Greenfield & Williams 2018, p.22).

Rhetoric is based on the principles of address, argument and play (Leith and Myerson, p.xii). Language is always addressed to someone - an audience or audiences - in a specific context. Audiences are “elastic” and have “a strong desire to participate,” (Leith & Myerson 1989, p.5). Argument means all utterances are seen as replies to other utterances and their position. Arguments always have a social context, that is, they involve the values and norms of the culture from which they arise. Play refers to the idea that “the meaning of an utterance will always go beyond the conscious control of the speaker or writer and there will thus be a looseness or play of meaning.” (Leith and Myerson 1989, p.xii). Consequently, rhetoric can be viewed as a process used to reveal politics and power relations, and as an exercise of power through communication.

To describe the operation of rhetoric is to [lay] bare the interaction context that the speaker or writer has constructed in the text (Alasutari 1995, 94) and to attend to the particular audiences for whom, and the particular occasions on which, this argumentation is played out.
(Dearman, Greenfield & Williams, 2018, p.22).

The rhetorical approach is based on the cultural model of communication and a social relational model of power. The cultural model of communication sees communication as “a constant process of balancing the possibilities of culture (social language is shared experiences and meanings) with the needs of individuality,”(Grossberg, Wartella & Whitney 2006, p.7). It suggests “humans live in a meaningful world which they have produced through their own culture” (Grossberg, Wartell & Whitney 2006, p.8). A social relational model of power emphasises that power is relational and productive. Rhetoric is a “process in the production, transmission, and interpretation of utterances, spoken or written, scripted or unprepared,” (Leith and Myerson 1989, p. xii), and so it is important to look beyond the message of a text, and consider the producers, audience and context. The rhetorical approach employs categories and questions which aim to give rise to an understanding of the politics and power relations at play in a text or texts. It is open and exploratory rather than fixed. It is a way to analyse a text, and aims to make sense of the relationship between communication, politics, and governing.

“A modern digital economy to secure Australia’s future,” (Frydenberg, Morrison & Hume 2021) is a media release from the Australian Liberal party released on May 6, days before the 2021 federal budget announcement. It provides an example of the use of the rhetoric of the future. The statement outlines that the federal government will spend \$1.2 billion on “policies and actions” that will secure Australia’s place in a digitally driven future.

According to Leith & Myerson (2009) “asking ‘whose words are these?’ is an ancient practice,” (Leith & Myerson 2009, p.152) and is a powerful tool when asked rhetorically.

Liberal party members Frydenberg, Morrison and Hume are the producers of this text but they are also speaking on behalf of, and are influenced by, other party members as well as by the traditional values associated with the Liberal-National party. “There is no one who writes purely his own words. Everyone writes *with other voices*,” (Leith & Myerson 2009, p.153).

The idea of the future is a routine part of political debate and employed to justify government programs and policy. The statement proposes “the policies and actions the government is taking to grow Australia’s future as a modern and leading digital economy by 2030,” (Frydenberg, Morrison & Hume 2021). The rhetoric of the future can be used as “a cause for a revitalization of optimism” (Quirk 2009, p.134). This announcement is situated within the context of a global pandemic that has triggered economic uncertainty. The government is aware of this context and is attempting to persuade Australians to trust that they will lead the country out of the crisis of 2020 and secure a safe economic future. As Quirk suggests, “[an] exoneration to the sublime future is an attempt to ward off dissent and to embellish cosmetically the blemishes of the body politic with imagery of a greater future for all,” (Quirk 2009, p.134).

The aim therefore is to persuade Australians to support the policies that will be outlined in the coming budget. It has also been suggested that an election could be called in 2021 and so these communications are potentially a tool to mobilise people to vote for the Liberal-National party if the election were to occur.

When the authors say, “the digital transformation occurring in every sector and every facet of our lives” (Frydenberg, Morrison & Hume 2021), the future is presented as technology driven and inevitable. This is typical of the rhetoric of the future. The phrase “a vibrant digital economy is the key to Australia’s future,” (Frydenberg, Morrison and Hume 2021) calls on the audience to embrace digital technologies as they are vital to the nation’s future. The Liberal party places much emphasis on them being better economic managers than their opposition. It is part of their ideology. Quirk suggests the rhetoric of the future can be “the fulfilment of a particular ideology or idealism...[and] [t]echnologies will yield a way out of current dilemmas and a new age of peace,” (Quirk 2009, p134). In uncertain global economic times, such hope can be reassuring and can work to mobilise people to support the party and their policies. As Dearman, Greenfield & Williams (2018) point out, “[r]hetorics ‘perform’—or help bring about (should they persuade their audiences)—the state of affairs they claim to present and offer to audiences. That is, rhetorics propose or offer arguments to their audiences about how the world is,” (Dearman, Greenfield & Williams 2018, p.22).

This text also employs the rhetoric of enterprise. The phrase a “greater digital adoption will improve our competitiveness and lift our productivity- driving job creation and higher wages,” (Frydenberg, Morrison & Hume 2021) does not explicitly use the term enterprise but words associated with it. The rhetoric of enterprise can also be used to justify certain government policies and programs. ‘Enterprise’ does not just refer to business ventures or characteristics of modern entrepreneurs. Rather,

it refers to the ways in which economic, political, social and personal vitality is considered best achieved by the generalisation of a particular conception of the enterprise form to all forms of conduct - to the conduct of organisations previous previously saying as non-commercial, to the conduct of government and its agencies and to the conduct of individuals. (Du Gay ,p.38).

“Adoption”, “competitiveness” and “productivity” are words associated with this form of conduct that has become not only acceptable, but necessary and inevitable through the rhetoric of enterprise.

In his budget speech on May 11, federal treasurer Josh Frydenberg also used phrasing associated with the rhetorics of future and enterprise. He proposes that to recover from the

coronavirus pandemic and “build for the future,” Australians must embrace enterprise. Individual “effort” and “personal responsibility” are argued as being “enduring values” (Frydenberg 2021). So, as well as outlining government economic interventions, the treasurer is putting responsibility on the Australian people to act in a certain way to realise an ideal future. This highlights a shift from the responsibility of the state to provide for all society’s needs. As du Gay (2004) writes, “organizations and other actants that were once enmeshed in what are represented as the ‘bureaucratic’ lines of force of the ‘social’ state are to be made more responsible for securing their own future survival and well-being.” (du Gay 2004, p.40). This extends to the conduct of individuals. Frydenberg is using the rhetoric of enterprise as a means of governing, mobilising through communication rather than by force or authoritarianism.

The rhetorics of enterprise and future are used in conjunction in these texts from the Liberal party to persuade Australians to support the party’s budget policies and the party in general. The example reveals rhetoric as an exercise of power through communication, employed by those seeking to govern.

Federal Australian opposition leader Anthony Albanese provided a speech on May 13 in response to the 2021 budget. When applying a rhetorical approach, “to argue is not merely to put forward a view but also to speak, or write, *in the awareness of a differing, opposing view*” (Leith & Myerson 1990, p.85). Albanese is replying to the arguments presented by the Liberal party in their May 11 budget. He is the speaker, but also speaks on behalf of the Labor party. This is politics, not only in the sense that those speaking are politicians, but in the sense that politics involves conflict and negotiation between various actors. The meaning of any political situation is not simply ‘delivered’, it is produced in and through communication. The meaning of this speech can be explored by using a rhetorical approach.

This text is evidenced by the rhetoric of the future. The words “a Labor Government will invest in Australian industry and our workforce, setting them up for success today and into the future,” (Albanese 2021) emphasises the importance of planning today for the future and this is used here to justify proposed policy. Albanese says his goal is to make Australia a “renewable energy superpower” (Albanese 2021). Like the opposition, he is advocating for a particular future. Here, the means to realise this future is through renewable, rather than “digital” technology. The ideals and ideology of the Labor party differ from their opposition in that they generally regard climate change action as more urgent. Albanese may be speaking directly to potential Labor voters but could also be responding in awareness of a wider context. The appointment of the Biden administration in the US has seen a shift in policy to act on climate change and it is reasonable to suggest that this has influenced other western countries. However, both Australian parties use the rhetoric of the future as something that “can save us from a false consciousness, a deflection away from problems of the present,” (Quirk 2009, p.138). The materials may differ, but it is still technology that will save the day. Furthermore, as Quirk points out, “...modern technologies invite the public to participate in a ritual of control in which fascination with technology masks the underlying factors of politics and power...” (Quirk 2009, p.150).

The text also employs the rhetoric of fear. Albanese warns Australians that a failure to embrace renewable technology means they will miss out on a prosperous future, employment opportunities, and be left behind other nations. “If we don’t get smart, if we don’t get serious, if we don’t get moving - the same thing is going to happen again” and Australia will “miss out on jobs and investment” (Albanese 2021). This “same thing” refers to past practices of sending Australian produced materials overseas. The rhetoric of fear is used to service the rhetoric of future to persuade Australians to accept Labor’s policy over their opposition. Again, with the prospect of an election imminent, the Labor party are using rhetoric to persuade and as a tactic to exercise power. Power is not something that is acquired or seized but “exercised within interactions...[and] through relationships, or networks,” (Gauntlett 2008, p.128). This example shows how media and communication are embedded in politics, power and governing.

The rhetorical approach is a set of tools for understanding the meaning of a text as well as the context in which it exists. Meaning is produced in and through communicative interactions. The examples in this essay have been analysed using the rhetorical approach to show how the rhetorics of future, enterprise fear have been used by their composers to persuade their audiences to desired outcomes. The application of the rhetorical approach in this way helps to gain insight into the relationship between communication, politics, power relations and governing.

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